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Media’s effect on tobacco use

Does the media have an effect on the use of tobacco? This question has been discussed many times throughout the past fifty years. Tobacco use has changed a lot over the years. From the 50s’ and 60s’ where everyone smoked and it was encouraged and portrayed on almost every film or tv show. Smoking then was always depicted as being the “cool” and “in” thing, and information on the possible side effects of smoking was rarely discussed or mentioned. One would think this constant encouragement of using tobacco would have some sort of an effect on the young and impressionable. Smoking was also much more accepted than more recent times, especially concerning where someone was allowed to smoke. In the past people were allowed to smoke in super markets, planes, restaurants, and even hospitals. Media of all forms were plastered in this places promoting their product that was considered at one time not a dangerous substance. However, more information came to light more and more people were beginning to learn that tobacco use and specifically smoking was very dangerous and carried many health complications. This information was too little too late for some people, as they were already addicted and this information or information from the media would not affect their tobacco use. This news about tobacco being dangerous did not have an immediate effect. Tobacco ads were still posted everywhere, people still smoked everywhere, and all movies showed people smoking non stop. In the the first half of the century people did not really have a fair chance to educate themselves or even to receive fair and accurate information regarding smoking and its effects on health. As early as the 30s’ studies were coming out that eluded to a connection between cigarette use and cancer. These were not always broadcasted to the public, and if they were it was not nearly to the extent that ads and media promoting tobacco use were being broadcasted. (cite ash.org) As well, cigarette companies were not fair in the way that they promoted their cigarettes. For example, on Phillip morris which is the company that creates Marlboro cigarettes along with many others, released an ad in 1943 that said : “Don’t smoke is advice hard for patients to swallow. May we suggest instead ‘Smoking Philip Morris?’ Tests showed three out of every four cases of smokers’ cough cleared on changing to Philip Morris. Why not observe the results for yourself?” (Key) With ads like this that appear to portray a “healthier cigarette” sent mixed signals to consumers that made making healthy choices very difficult. Due to these mixed ideas about what is healthy and what is not many people did not quit smoking and tobacco use remained high. According to the Center for disease control in 1955 smoking rates were at 56.9% for men and 28.4% for females. This is still a huge proportion of people still smoking even with the knowledge existing that smoking was harmful to health. Was this continuing trend of smoking due in some part to media?

SECONDARY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Smoking is an incredibly addictive and incredibly dangerous substance. It reportedly takes the lives of one half of regular users. (AA #1) With odds like this why would people still decide to start using this product. Some would say the media has played a large role in encouraging this harmful product. It is no mystery that media use has been on a drastic upswing for the past 100 years. With exposure to media becoming more and more prevalent in each generation’s lives, it would seem media would have a growing impact on each generation’s lives and choices they make. Cigarette companies have their fair share of media that they create whether it is specific advertisements or more disguised advertisement in movies. No matter what the question remains, does media have an effect on tobacco use? According to ncbi.nlm.nih.gov tobacco companies claim their ads and marketing tactics do not have have a direct effect on the youth and creating new smokers. (National) Despite these claims by tobacco companies to attempt and defend their marketing tactics, research has shown that these tobacco companies’ “brand-level” marketing has a three times higher effect on the youth when compared to adults. (National) This shows that their marketing strategies to reach the public does have a large effect on tobacco use. The findings of this research are especially contradictory to their earlier claim to the public regarding their tobacco ads and the youth.

This however is just one example and just one study regarding advertisements put out by the tobacco company, and it does not entirely explain all forms of media that may or may not have an effect on the public’s use of tobacco. One topic of interest when media’s effect on tobacco use comes up is depictions of tobacco use in movies. It is not question that many movies depict characters smoking and using all forms of tobacco. Can this be connected to tobacco use in the youth and all people in general. According to tobaccofreekids.org there is a definitive relationship between smoking in movies and initiation of tobacco use in children. They say that in a study conducted recently it was found that “Smoking in movies affects how youth and adults view the social acceptability of smoking and perceptions of the functions of smoking, as well as its consequences.” (Schmidt) This spells it out with explicit clarity that a prominent amount of the research that has been done leads toward the finding that media does have an overwhelming effect on the amount of tobacco use in society among adults and kids.

This represents a vast majority of research that has been done regarding whether or not the media does have an effect on the amount of tobacco use. Many of the research that exists does not claim that media has no effect at all. The research also shows that most smoking portrayed in movies shows it in a more positive light than a negative one. (Schmidt) Movies portray the smoker as one of the main characters, and as the “bad boy” or the “cool guy” which adds to these claims that smoking in movies does in fact portray smoking less dangerous and as a more acceptable practice. This explains movies that purposely make smoking appear less harmful than it is, but what about ads that purposely attempt to make tobacco appear more dangerous and show just how harmful it can be? Do these have any effect on the amount of tobacco people use?

According to research, the answer is yes. In a statement regarding ads that were ran that contained ex-smokers and showed just how harmful and dangerous cigarettes are Susan Liss claims that the “Tips from a Former Smoker” ad campaign led to 1.6 million people attempting to quit and 100,000 people successfully quitting smoking cigarettes. (Liss) These claims further back up the claims that tobacco use is affected by media in more ways than just one. Not only can tobacco in the media increase tobacco use in the public, but tobacco in the media can also decrease levels of tobacco use in the public. This shows that tobacco in media does indeed have some sort of effect on tobacco use.

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

During our research our main goal was to determine how media plays a role in how people use tobacco products. We wanted to have a better understanding on how and if media intrigues people to use tobacco or helps current users quit. We wanted to know how movies, ads, and commercials influence the use of tobacco and how people felt about their influence on the matter. Understanding how people thought about these forms of media would allow us to know if media has a positive or negative effect on the use of tobacco products.

When conducting our research we decided that the best way to gather information would be to have interviews with several people. We thought the best way would be to interview people with different attitudes toward tobacco use so we could get a range of different perspectives on the topic. We interviewed people who were regular tobacco users as well as social smokers, ex smokers, and people who don’t use tobacco at all. Having all these different types of people allowed for many different responses that allowed us to get good answers to our questions. We conducted our interviews with 8 fairly open ended questions that allowed people to give their true opinions on the topic and let people take the questions in their own direction. Allowing people to do this let us really know how people felt about the role media plays in tobacco use.

Once our interviews were finished and we were able to look into the information that we had gathered we really didn’t find too many things that were very surprising or out of the norm. We began our interviews with asking how often you use tobacco and what we found was that people who considered themselves tobacco users, used tobacco products every day. Also our ex smoker who we interviewed claimed that he used to smoke every day also. Other responses including our so called “social smoker,” said that he only uses tobacco once every few weeks and its always either at parties or with friends who are also smoking.

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